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CONGRESS CURB ON SHARING SECRETS FEARED

By DAVID SHEARS in Washington

SENIOR Central Intelligence Agency officials are worried that Congress might seize on the Cheltenham security breach to impose tighter surveillance of their work and curb the sharing of American secrets with Britain.

Professionals in the Washington intelligence community view the Prime case as serious, but nobody believes that the Cheltenham "mole" betrayed military secrets such as the location of Nato nuclear warheads or the state of readiness of every Nato division.

"It is most unlikely that he would have had access to anything of the sort," said Mr George Carver, a retired CIA deputy.

Mr Carver, now working as a senior fellow of the Georgetown University Centre for Strategic and International Studies, said that although he had no direct knowledge of Prime's "leaks" to the Russians, the case was certainly less damaging than, for example, the Philby defection.

Washington sources who cannot be named say the kind of Russian messages and signals that would have crossed Prime's desk were less than "cosmic" in their security classification.

"Typical of the material Prime was given to translate would have been coded military signals passing between Russian army units. Much of this would have been routine traffic.

Mr Carver said that Prime would not necessarily have known how this material had been obtained, but the very fact that he had it must have been of great interest to his Soviet "case officer" or local spymaster.

By examining the messages Prime was translating, the KGB would have been able to determine which of their codes had been broken. This in turn would have enabled Moscow to attempt "disinformation" — the deliberate feeding of misleading material to the West.

Mr Carver suggested that Prime might have been useful to his Russian masters by telling them which of the messages he handled had aroused particular interest among his superiors.

"This would have given the Soviets an indication of the lines of inquiry Western intelligence was pursuing at any given moment," he said.

Carter ruling

A recent WASHINGTON Post report that Nato military secrets had been betrayed was not taken seriously by the Washington intelligence agencies, but CIA chiefs fear that it might prompt Congress to enforce President Carter's 1978 order requiring tighter Congressional surveillance of their activities.

When this order was issued, the CIA felt its secrets were no longer protected since they might "leak" from briefings on Capitol Hill. London, therefore, hesitated to pass on some British intelligence material.

In the wake of the Prime case, CIA officials fear that some senators will try to restrict the two-way flow of intelligence between America and Britain for fear of betrayal.

Already it is said that some staff assistants of the Senate Intelligence Committee are "snapping at the heels" of Mr William Casey, the CIA Director.

So far these fears have not materialised.

Intelligence professionals on both sides say that Anglo-American co-operation continues unchanged and, in the words of one, "as comfortable as can be."